

Message: "The Value of Being a Pest"

Scripture Lesson: Mark 10:46-52

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." ⁵²Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

I am discovering as a part of my new role as a grandfather that one of the privileges of such a role is to occasionally report on the youngster's progress. I have now been a grandfather for one year, eight months, eighteen days, and ten-and-a-half hours, not that I'm counting or anything, but it is high time I let you know how our granddaughter Alva is doing. In short, she's doing great - she's not only walking, she's running - well, she says she's running, but it's more of an animated fast walk. She's not only talking, she's using sentences, and she's not only using sentences, they're making sense - no longer only isolated words or phrases; she's asking for things, she's saying "please" and "thank you" and "you're the greatest granddaddy of them all" (OK, OK, she hasn't said that one exactly.....at least not yet!). She's outgrowing her clothes; she's becoming quite a crayon artist; she even sings songs sometimes. It's wonderful to see her progress.

But there's one development that is not so wonderful. I've seen it a couple of times now as I watch her once a week. It doesn't happen very often, but when it does, it's somewhat.....annoying. What happens is that she wants something, but it's not time for her to have it, such as a snack, or it's something she shouldn't have, like our cat's tail in her grip. When I tell her "no, it's not time for a snack" or "no, the cat doesn't like to have its tail yanked," I get a look from her that says "Oh, yeah?" And she starts saying "snack" louder and louder, or she lunges more deliberately towards the cat, reaching for her tail. And as I impede her progress, as I say "no" or block her outstretched hand, her face gets a little bit redder and her animations grow stronger. It escalates like this for awhile, until I figure out what's going on, and change tactics, drawing her attention away from the potential transgression and toward something of different interest. And that always works.

But the point is this: in these moments when my granddaughter doesn't get what she wants, she gets louder, more demanding, more animated, and more annoying. This is nothing unusual for a child under two years old who has much to

learn about communication and boundaries and basic human interaction. And, to be fair, there are many times when she has not learned the words to make her request verbally - and these gestures of hers can draw attention to something she needs. But when it is something she doesn't need, when it is something she wants but can't have - well, it could be said that she begins to be a bit of a pest.

Some adults are stuck in that age, it would seem, and we all know someone like that - someone who is constantly at us for something, who wants what we can't give or what they shouldn't have, be it resource or agreement or approval. And they hang around us for whatever reason, pushing our buttons, pulling our triggers, as if their sole reason for existence is to annoy us deeply. And it makes it the more annoying that an adult doesn't have the excuse of a child, who has yet to learn there are better ways to get what one wants than to pester and fuss; adults, it would seem, should know better.

But then, there are others who could be called pests, who annoy and cajole and frustrate others - but they are more than justified in their pursuit. Something is wrong. Something is not the way it ought to be. Things are out of balance; reality is skewed; something is unjust and needs correction. And the first step is to draw attention to the matter. This is often the essential role of a pest.

The story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, illustrates this virtuous side of being a pest, a side the disciples miss completely until Jesus intercedes. I believe it is nearly impossible for us to empathize fully with this man who couldn't see - in the context of first century Palestine, to be blind was a societal death sentence, with begging the only option for survival. Of note is that he asks Jesus, "Let me see again," implying that he once had sight but lost it - we can only speculate whether by illness or injury, but either way, this man experienced a great trauma in a day with little if any medical redress. Whatever the case, it would seem clear that Bartimaeus was a very despondent person.

If there was any doubt about this, it is erased by his desperate cry to Jesus when he hears him approaching, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"; when shushed, he cried louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" I wonder if he cried out louder and louder and louder, making a scene, turning heads, making people uncomfortable.... I envision that the disciples weren't sure what to do with him, and perhaps simply wanted to get on down the road - for this man was beginning to be a pest.

But Jesus recognized true suffering and true need when he saw it, or heard it. The cry of a heart struck down by trauma is a cry like no other, a cry borne of both desperation and hope - desperate because of the trauma, hope because of the belief that relief is possible. So very often, the cries of those who are traumatized are a constant din in the ears of society, and for some are the sounds of annoyance; but for those whose heart leads the mind, whose faith leads life, any such annoyance presents an opportunity to practice a love that changes all things.

Case in point - you may have noticed that our daughter, Emily, has been in our prayer list here and there, for she is expecting our second grandchild (well, I guess it is their first child!). It's been a bit of a bumpy road, as is fairly regular with pregnancy - morning sickness, aches and pains, and the likes. But then a twist of our times visited our daughter, as we learned several days ago that she had tested positive for Covid. A whole new realm of concern opened up for us all, as Emily is due in three weeks' time; as the symptoms began to develop, our hearts grew greatly concerned.

Emily had most of the symptoms of Covid - fever, coughing, congestion, and a loss of a sense of taste - and in each phone call and text, which happened several times a day, we sensed no real improvement. Then, it happened - our son-in-law stepped into action. He began making inquiries of hospitals and doctors and clinics, seeking advice and counsel about how to help Emily. He consulted OB-GYN's and pharmacists regarding treatment options and any special instructions regarding having Covid while very pregnant. He was able, after many phone calls, to line up an appointment with a specialist, and after more phone calls, was able to see to her receiving one of the more effective treatments for Covid - which, thank God, seems to have worked well.

But as we spoke with our daughter and son-in-law on the phone, he said something which made my day - he said as he kept calling and calling people, sometimes the same doctor or clinic several times each day, he made some of them mad. He was annoying them with his persistence. In other words, my son-in-law had been a pest. A pest of the best kind. And we are extremely grateful to him.

When something's wrong, when loved ones are hurting, when we ourselves experience loss or pain or trauma, when injustice rears its head, when life is cheapened through violence or negligence, our God is clear in his expectations of us as people of faith. We are expected to become pests - of the best kind. Pests

who will not leave well enough alone when things are not well enough as they are. Pests who recognize these same kind of imbalances are not tolerated by God, who is a pest on our behalf. God doesn't rest when things are off, when hatred spills over, when despair looms in our lives. God is persistent in his insistence that the rule of love is meant to govern all. And God is a pest of the best kind, continually bothering us and prodding us on the pathway of how things ought to be.

We may not like it, but it is pretty clear that we Christians are called upon to make a stink sometimes - the right kind of stink, that is. To speak up when things are wrong; to speak truth to power; to show up when it's not a popular thing to do; to keep on doing these things until minds are awakened and hearts are enlivened to the dictates of love as affirmed by Christ. And just as Jesus did, we must seek to raise up these matters even to the point of annoyance, that the wrongness of the world continues to be challenged until changed.